DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 469 CS 217 361

AUTHOR Teague, Deborah Coxwell
TITLE From Product to Process to Post Process: A Convert Questions Her Convictions.
PUB DATE 2000-04-00
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the College English Association National Conference (Charleston, SC, April, 2000).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; *Process Approach (Writing); Student Attitudes; Student Needs; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Theory; *Product Approach (Writing)

ABSTRACT

The way writing is taught has changed over the last 35 years--in this new century the movement has been to the "post process age" to focus on the role that social factors such as race, class, ethnicity, and gender play in determining writing development. This paper considers how this shift in the writing classroom from an emphasis on product to process to post process has affected the way writing is taught, what students learn, their attitudes about writing, and the grades they receive in their courses. The paper asks that writing teachers think not only about what their students might have gained from this dramatic shift in composition theory and pedagogy, but also what they might have lost. It also describes the teacher's/author's experiences as a teacher of college composition through the years. (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 448 469

From Product to Process to Post Process: A Convert Questions Her Convictions.

by Deborah Coxwell Teague

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

D. Coxwell Teague

CS 217 361

Deborah Coxwell Teague
Panel Presentation
College English Association National Conference
Charleston, SC
April 2000

From Product to Process to Post Process: A Convert Questions Her Convictions

Much about the way we teach writing has changed over the last 35 years or so years since the landmark Dartmouth College Seminar in the summer of 1966, that many credit to have sparked a revolution in the teaching of writing. We have moved from a way of teaching writing that is referred to as the current traditional paradigm, an approach that many argue stressed mechanical correctness above all else, to an approach that focuses on the process of writing. And now in this new century, we have moved to what has been coined the "post process age"—to a focus on the role that "social factors [such] as race, class, ethnicity, and gender" (Allison et al. 9) play in determining writing development.

This afternoon I would like us to consider how this shift in the writing classroom from an emphasis on product to process to post process has affected the way we teach writing, what students learn, their attitudes about writing, and the grades they receive in our courses. I would like us to think about not only what our students might have gained from this dramatic shift in composition theory and pedagogy, but also what they might have lost.

Growing up in the late 50s and into the 60s, I was taught to write during an era when the current traditional paradigm reigned supreme. My teachers never asked me to use invention strategies such as freewriting, brainstorming, or clustering to generate ideas for paper topics. Quite the contrary: they always provided the topic. Whether or not I was particularly interested in what they told me to write about was never an issue. I was the student—they were the teachers. They told me what to write, and, good student that I was, I did as they instructed. Did I struggle to find a way to organize my thoughts so that I could clearly communicate them to a reader? No, of course not. My teachers taught me that there was only one correct structure: the five-paragraph theme, and dutiful student that I was, I did not question them. Writing for me was easy. My teachers gave me a topic, I came up with a three-point thesis statement, three supporting paragraphs (each beginning with a topic sentence, of course), and a conclusion that restated my thesis in a slightly different way. I was an avid reader and had unconsciously absorbed many of the rules that govern standard written grammar, mechanics, and punctuation, so writing for me was a breeze. I was a pro at producing virtually error-free five-paragraph themes.

When I graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in English Education and became an English teacher, I taught my middle and high school students to write exactly as I had been taught. And a few years later when I earned my master's degree and began teaching freshman composition, I continued, for a while, to emphasize mechanical correctness above all else in my writing classes. The students who liked to read did well.

They quickly learned how to structure a five-paragraph theme and write an essay that contained few errors in grammar, mechanics, and punctuation. But the ones who were not such good readers were lucky to make Cs in my classes. Dutiful teacher that I was, I marked every single error on their papers with my trusty red pen and blindly believed that doing so would help them become better writers. It almost never did. I passed back their first draft/last draft papers at the end of class, and they turned to the last page to see what grade I had given them. In all my wisdom, I did not ask my students to correct the errors they had made, and so the only purpose served by the red ink that covered their papers was to further lower their opinions of themselves as writers. They knew before they turned in their papers that they were not good writers, and the grades I gave them along with the many red marks served only to substantiate what they already knew.

Contrast this picture with one of a writing classroom in which the teacher emphasizes writing as a process and frequently allows students to have a voice in the choice of topics on which they write. In this classroom students are given time to consider the topic and are provided with a variety of strategies that serve to help them generate ideas. In this classroom students are taught "that it usually takes multiple drafts to create and complete a successful text" (WPA Outcomes Statement 2), and in the early drafts of their papers, errors in grammar, punctuation, and mechanics are not addressed. Instead, emphasis is placed on the writer discovering what she wants to communicate to a reader and how to effectively communicate those ideas. Both the teacher and peers read and respond to drafts to help the writer know when she is and when she is not succeeding in her endeavor to communicate with her intended audience. In later drafts, after the writer has discovered what she wants to say and how to organize her thoughts, matters of grammar, mechanics, and punctuation are attended to. Problematic areas are discussed with the writer, who has an opportunity to revise them before turning in a "final" draft.

According to the Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition, published by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, students in process-centered writing courses are taught to "use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating" (2). They are taught that writing assignments involve "a series of tasks" that can include "finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources" (2). They learn to "integrate their own ideas with those of others" and to use "writing as a critical thinking method" (2). They "learn to critique their own and others' works" and "to balance the advantages of relying on others with the responsibility of doing their part" (2). Students are taught that writing is "an open process" that allows them to return to their drafts and "use later invention and re-thinking to revise their work" (2). Grades are seldom assigned to drafts in progress. Instead, they are more often assigned to a portfolio that represents the sum of the student's work on a particular paper sequence or on several paper sequences the student has worked on over the course of the term. This shift away from assigning grades to individual drafts which students were not allowed to revise often results in an increased number of students making higher grades in writing courses. The shift from product to process-centered writing instruction is often credited as being the direct cause of grade inflation in first-year writing a.k.a. freshman composition courses across our nation.

And while I see myself as a died in the wool believer of the merits of process over product-centered writing instruction, the exorbitantly high percentage of As and Bs in first-year writing classrooms has caused me to question my convictions. In my correspondence with writing program administrators at major universities throughout our country, I have learned that it is not at all uncommon for over 80% of the students in first-year writing classes to receive As and Bs for final course grades, and several schools reported that close to 50% of their first-year writing students receive As. That disturbs me. Are 50% of our students excellent writers? I don't think so. Can over 80% be accurately classified as above average writers? I doubt it. We appear to be passing out As and Bs like candy—and whatever happened to Cs? We seem to be giving high grades to anyone who shows up for class and turns in his work. Has our shift from product to process-centered writing instruction coupled with our growing interest in and emphasis on how social factors affect writers weakened the standards we set for our students?

Many argue that students are receiving higher grades in writing courses not because we have diluted our standards but because we are teaching more effectively and students are learning more. Ken Macrorie, an early pioneer in the crusade for teaching process over product, states in his 1970 book, *Uptaught*, one of the first books on process theory and pedagogy, that if we as writing instructors do our jobs well, our students will grow as writers and will receive better grades (89). And 27 years later, in her 1997 article "Cross Purposes: Grade Deflation, Classroom Practices," Eleanor Agnew argues for the high grades Macrorie predicted students would receive in process-centered writing classrooms. Agnew states:

> Writing instructors who follow pedagogical models based on composition theory set their students up for success. Student writers who are respected and encouraged as writers, who are given time to think about their topics before writing, who are allowed to consult with teachers and peers during the writing process, who write several drafts before they hand in the final copy to be graded, who even come to enjoy writing, are more likely to produce better written texts—and receive better grades—than the students across the hall who write papers for a more traditional teacher who gives them one class period to produce a final draft. (40)

In her essay, "Implementing Portfolios: Why Grades Can Go Up," Melinda Merriam quotes one of the students in her writing course who adds support to Agnew's argument that we do tend to "set…students up for success" and also demand more from them in process-centered writing classrooms. Merriam cites one of her students who compares the work he does in her portfolio-based course with the writing he does in another writing class.

> I'm a pretty conscientious student and write reasonably well. In one class this semester, each essay I write receives a grade, along with thoughtful teacher comments, suggestions, and questions. Rather than reworking the piece based on insight from the teacher, I put it completely out of mind. It's done. On to the next assignment. However, for this class where I'll choose some writing to go

> into a portfolio, I've rewritten two pieces four times each, changing them substantially each time, based mostly on response from a teacher-reader who questions, suggests, and points out weaknesses not evident to me… I consider each comment, re-read my work most carefully, and spend a lot more time with it than I do with the assignments in the other class. (2)

When students invest themselves in their writing, when they take a true interest in the topic about which they are writing, when they take time to re-think, re-see, and re-work their writing, they are quite likely to receive higher grades than they would have been assigned had they not taken advantage of the opportunity to do this additional work.

There's something else to be considered in our discussion of the preponderance of high grades in writing classrooms: while the process-movement and the increasing use of portfolio evaluation appear to play a role in grade inflation, they do not receive all the credit—or blame—as the case may be. At many of our colleges and universities, a C has become the lowest possible passing grade. To receive full credit for required first-year writing courses, students must make no lower than a C, so there are only three possible passing grades, rather than four.

Still another factor that has affected the rising grades in first-year writing is the implementation of pre-first-year writing courses many schools now offer. Upon entering our schools, students take a placement test, and 15-20% are placed in an introductory-level course before they take college composition. In effect, we are removing the students who would get Ds and Fs before they take the course. And everyone in the course is predicted to be at least C level when they enter. Those who improve, then, receive Bs.

Another reason so many of our writing students are receiving As and Bs is that it is not at all uncommon for teachers to configure their grading scales so that student participation constitutes 20-30% of the final course grade, and many teachers give the full 20-30% to students who simply show up for class, contribute every now and then to class discussion, and participate even minimally in peer response workshops. A student whose writing clearly merits no grade higher than a C can easily make a B after participation is factored into the overall course grade, and students whose writing merits no grade higher than a B make As instead. Teachers who choose to include class participation as a percentage of the final grade need to have a concrete plan for evaluating that portion of the grade and should consider weighting it no more than 10% of the overall course grade.

More students than ever before appear to be making As and Bs in college-level writing classes. If they are receiving higher grades because the quality of their writing is higher than the quality of student writing in the past, then they deserve the high grades. As a teacher who has taught in both product and process-centered writing classrooms, I know that most of my students work harder, learn more, are sincerely challenged, and are much more likely to grow as writers when I provide them with the opportunities afforded by a process approach. Yes, their final grades tend to be higher than the grades my students received when I gave them one class period to write an essay and provided no

- opportunities for reflection and revision, but my students are also learning more and deserve the grades they receive. Nevertheless, when students are assigned high grades simply because they attend class, occasionally contribute to class discussion, and do the minimum work assigned, we fail them. The grades on their transcripts may be high, but even so, we fail them by not challenging them to work to their full potential. If we're really going to set students up for success, we will have to expect more of them as writers and readers, even as we teach them and help them more in the writing classroom.

Works Cited

Agnew, Eleanor. "Cross Purposes: Grade Deflation, Classroom Practices." In *Grading in the Post-Process Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1997.

Allison, Libby, Lizbeth Bryant, and Maureen Hourigan. *Grading in the Post-Process Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1997.

Macrorie, Ken. *Uptaught*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1970.

Merriam, Melinda. "Implementing Portfolios: Why Grades Can Go Up." Unpublished Essay, 1996.

Writing Program Administrators' Outcomes Statement-WPA Journal Version, 8-99. http://www.mwsc.edu/~outcomes/TOS.html.